

MORTUARY RITES IN NEW IRELAND (BISMARCK ARCHIPELAGO)¹

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121 IN New Ireland death is a most important ritual event and the rites concerning it are of particular psychological interest. The effect of the death on the survivors may be studied from two aspects: first, that of the rites which include the traditional activities of the survivors and the duties between them; second, that dealing with their emotional attitudes. Both are studied in chronological order—at the time of preparation for death, at burial, and after burial. The problem is to ascertain the function of the rites in connection with the emotional attitudes, or more concretely, to find out how the rites meet the psychological situation caused by death.

Among the survivors one distinguishes the clan relatives (in this society, close blood relatives through the female line), acquired relatives (husband or wife) and the rest of the community. Each of these groups is affected somewhat differently by the death and each functions in a different manner. According to their function, the survivors may be divided into mourners and what for want of a better name may be called executives, those responsible for carrying out the rites. Some fall into both groups.

105 Before describing the rites and discussing the problems involved it is necessary to summarize briefly a few ethnological facts which have a bearing on the problem. This Melanesian society is both matrilineal and matrilocal. There are two exogamous moieties, the Eagle and the Hawk, which are subdivided into clans. The local unit is the village, which has a population of several hundred

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122 ¹The ethnological field work in New Ireland was done under the auspices of the Australian National Research Council in 1929-30. The island is divided into a number of linguistic units and the unit which the writer studied comprised five villages (Lesu, Ambwa, Langania, Libba and Tandis), covering approximately twelve miles on the east coast, about eighty miles from the northern end of the island. The author is now a National Research Fellow (U.S.) under the sponsorship of Professor Clark Wissler.

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and is divided into hamlets. The village of Lesu, where the writer lived, has 222 inhabitants living in fifteen hamlets. Each hamlet has its own cemetery and every native wants to be buried in the cemetery of the hamlet in which he was born. 105

Only the death of a very old person is considered normal. When a native who is not old dies (*i.e.*, one still able to work), his death is usually attributed to black magic. The rites are similar for all deaths, but at the death of an old person they are the most elaborate. The number of people at a funeral, the size of the feast, the elaborateness of the rites, are all graduated nicely to the age of the dead person.² If an infant is born dead there are no rites at all. It is buried immediately without feast or wailing. The funeral of a child takes place on the day of the death and is attended only by the people of the neighbouring hamlets. The funeral of a mature person, but not a very old one, will be held the day after death and will be a village affair, with some members of neighbouring villages there. The funeral of a very old person is a large inter-village affair, many people coming from quite distant settlements, and the body will be kept for two or three days before burial. The pattern at death is the same as it is during life. It is the old men and women who are the most important people and who are the leaders of the community. 761 838 764 561 [766]

While alive each person has a double called a *gas* which lives on the ground belonging to his totemic clan.³ This *gas* is not seen by its living double, although there are rare occasions mentioned in folk tales when a man has met his *gas*. When a person dies his *gas* dies too. At the time of death there issues from the dying man, with his last breath, his *tinuato* or ghost, which has no connection with the *gas*. The *tinuato* dwells in the body while the native is alive and comes out only at his death, while the *gas* always dwells outside on the clan land and dies when the person dies. The *tinuato* or ghost continues to live, but its place of existence and manner of living are very vague. It belongs to the realm of the supernatural, about which no questions are asked. For a month or so after death 774 775 [761]

²Cf. Camilla H. Wedgwood, Death and Social Status in Melanesia, *J.R.A.I.*, Vol. LVII.

³Vide the writer's Report on Research in New Ireland, *Oceania*, I, 1931, 357.

127 census are compared whenever possible to the results of this genealogical study of a smaller unit of the same people, for the purpose of checking the accuracy of the latter study.

ETHNOLOGICAL FACTS

105 Before presenting the tables it is pertinent to give a few ethnological facts related to the statistics. This group of Melanesians are an agricultural, matrilineal and matrilocal people, with exogamous moieties subdivided into clans. There is no scarcity of land, which is communally owned, and getting sufficient food is not difficult, although it requires a certain amount of industry. The diet is limited, taro being the staple food. This is supplemented by fish, pigs, yams, bananas, pawpaws, coconuts, etc.

582 Sexual customs have an important bearing on the statistics. A girl is usually married directly after her first menstruation. A man's preferred mate is the mother's brother's daughter's daughter, or the father's sister's daughter's daughter, and he is thus of a generation above his wife. While the preferred marriage quite frequently does not take place, the husband is almost always older than his wife, usually a difference of about five to ten years. The girl has had no sexual intercourse, although she has indulged in sexual play, but the man, being 836 some years past puberty, has had sexual experience previous to the time of his marriage. There are no unmarried women. There may be a 587 couple of young widows in the community, but it is just a question of time before they remarry. Both husband and wife have extra-marital 837 intercourse and there is no social stigma in having lovers or mistresses. Rather, it is the correct thing to do. The husband of the mother is 1851 always the sociological father of her children. Until very recently it 595 was quite usual for a man to have two wives and this had been the case with most of the married men of my community. It was relatively rare for a woman to have two husbands, although it did and still does happen 797 occasionally. Missions have taught a monogamous system of marriage, 595 with partial success. Polygamy still exists, but not to the same degree or extent as it did a generation ago. White contact has scarcely affected 837 extra-marital intercourse. Should the village be close to a mission center (mine was not) love affairs would simply be carried on more surreptitiously.

121 accounting for it. He wrote, "We have here only another effect of the loss of interest in life which I have held to be so potent in enhancing mortality. The people say themselves: 'Why should we bring children into the world only to work for the white man?' " ³⁰

Pitt-Rivers has emphasized still more strongly the influence of psychological factors from another point of view and suggests that the destruction of cultural institutions such as magic, economic structure, etc., results in boredom or loss of the *joie de vivre*, which in turn might operate to exterminate a race.³¹ He thinks that even though there be normal sexual intercourse, the woman might not conceive because her emotional life had been disturbed, which he would trace to the break up of the native culture through white contact.³²

105 The writer of this paper would not deny the possible influence of
114 these psychological factors when they were operative, but the point is
121 that the psychological factors mentioned by Dr. Rivers and by Pitt-
177 Rivers are not present among the people on whom this study was made
182 and therefore cannot be adduced as a cause for their decline. The
fundamental aspects of the native culture have not been broken up, and
these people are not bored, nor have they lost their *joie de vivre*. Al-
though there has been a fair amount of white contact, and cannibalism
and warfare have been abolished by the mandated government, their
kinship organization, economic structure, ritual and sexual life, are still
actively functioning according to their traditional custom. The people
are busy with their daily work (gardening and fishing) and with prepa-
rations for the many ritual feasts and dances. They flirt, marry, and
have their *affaires du coeur* in a very happy, casual fashion and do not,
as Dr. W. H. R. Rivers suggests, ask themselves why they should bring
children into the world. They are, as far as can be observed, quite
happy, decidedly not bored, and have a real interest in life.

177 The psychological factors mentioned by the two authors just quoted
may be operative on the generation of children now growing up.
Many of these have been to mission schools, where they are given
the concept of shame in connection with sexual matters, particularly in
regard to extra-marital intercourse, which is a very indigenous part
of their culture. White contacts are increasing and it is probably only a
matter of time before the native culture will be broken up. What the

³⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 104.

³¹ Pitt-Rivers, G. H. L. F.—*The Clash of Cultures*, London, 1927, pp. 142-148.

³² *Ibid.*, pp. 146-147.

574 Around food also is focused much of the prestige of an individual in his
 554 family. Here a man's standing is largely dependent upon his ability as a
 586 food provider and the woman's upon her industry in preparing the food.
 Failure on the part of either partner to fulfill these obligations is sufficient
 cause for a divorce.

SOCIAL ORGANIZATION

61 Before describing the feasts and showing the way in which much of life
 centers around food, it is necessary to give a very brief description of the
 essentials of the social organization. There are two exogamous moieties,
 the Eagle and the Hawk, which are subdivided into clans. Descent is ma-
 trilineal, the clan consisting of an extended family, all related through the
 female line. The next kinship unit in order of size is the individual family,
 which may be monogamous, is frequently polygamous, and occasionally
 polyandric.

621 On the basis of locality the largest unit is the village. In the district
 where I lived there are five villages forming one linguistic unit. This is not
 and never has been, as far as I could observe, a political unit. In the past,
 [721] warfare was frequent between the villages and there neither was nor is one
 chief for all of them, each having its own. The village is subdivided into
 [541] hamlets,—Lesu into fifteen. Residence is matrilocal and so a hamlet will
 usually have many female members of the same clan. The hamlet has from
 two to seven or eight houses, each one having its communal cooking ground
 [764] and generally a cook house also, for use on rainy days. With the exception
 of the very small ones, a hamlet has its own cemetery and men's house.

105 The society is agricultural. Gardening, fishing, hunting wild pigs, and
 cooking are the main everyday occupations. Trading is important and car-
 ried on according to exact and traditional rules. The familiar Melanesian
 gift-exchange is also practiced.

FREQUENCY OF FEASTS

527 After living in this society for only a short time, one is impressed by the
 574 great frequency of feasts. The following is a list of occasions on which they
 are held.

Occasion	Name
Pregnancy.....	aning asil tsegγ (eating for infant)
Birth.....	Gramysi (name of dance performed by women at this rite)
Giving name to infant.....	Basisis (name)
Several months after birth if infant is strong.....	aning asil wotwt tsegγ (eating for strong infant)